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Prologue

Sharp, pungent smells wafted off of every rock and bush as the tom strode down into the hollow, marking unknown territory that most certainly did not belong to him. His footsteps were quick and silent on the scraggly grasses. Branches tugged at the long fibers of his pelt, though he did not stop to fix the tangled twigs, simply pushing on until the brush gave away. Ahead, the trees filtered out into the clearing, and moonlight crept down onto the forest floor, illuminating all that it touched with cold, slender fingers.

The tom halted at the edge of the light, only a silver paw hesitating over the earth of the clearing. His tail flicked back and forth like an adder in the thick blanket of shadow, his eyes dull in the half light. After a moment or two of waiting, decision making, he stepped fully into the lit area, his gray pelt giving off an eerie sheen in the typical fashion of the night.

Wild blueberries tangled throughout the bracken and undergrowth, their fruit still green and unripened. Briers intertwined with the leafy bushes, catching on creepers that twirled around the necks of aspens and maples. The moonlight lit up everything in a silhouette of blacks browns and greens, save for the silver tom, who stood out like a swan on the water. The clearing itself was an oddity, with smooth, soft soil free of most pebbles and a clear overhead view of the waxing moon, nearly full. There would be a Peace Day soon, and it was his clan's turn to host.

His calm facade was only interrupted by the thin veil of fear scent that surrounded him like a constant aura. No crickets hummed in the distance, and only a few cicadas buzzed ominously, uncharacteristically quiet for such a night. It was as if the entire forest was holding its breath as one, frightened creature.

The tom sat, laying his tail over his paws, mainly to block the sight of unsheathed claws that dug feverishly into the soft dirt, not yet hardened with the frost-bitten air. He felt the fur on his scruff rising, an unintentional reflex due to the chill and the impending

danger.

"I know you're there. Even the smallest kit knows the scent of your kind," the tom called out, his voice carrying evenly through the crisp air.

After a moment, the snapping of twigs could be heard, then a large, swift shape shuffling through the shrubbery. Hackles raising, the tom narrowed his eyes at every flash of color, the slightest movement. He stood his ground, however, though he was starting to believe his motives to be more pointless by the second. And then from behind him, a barking laughter sounded in his ear. He crinkled his nose at the horrid smell that filled his senses like a rush of stale, festering water pushing through his nostrils and throat.

"I'm not impressed, Silver*kit*," the voice hissed, accented sharply with the tongue of the northern Tribes, and most definitely female. "I could have had your pelt draped over my shoulders by now. Curiosity killed the cat, however, it seems to be my curiosity keeping you alive, hm? What a turn of events." The voice paused to lick its chops, a loud, gloating smack that sent a chill down the tom's spine. "So what is it that ties you here, Silverstar? Am I really *that* interesting?"

"You know why I'm here," Silverstar replied simply, forcing his fur to lie flat on his back. "You know perfectly well why I'm here." His voice grew quiet, as if it took all his effort to keep his air of icy calm.

"Oh, the little furballs from the river? Why, they had to be punished. No kits outside camp, isn't that right?" Humor edged the female's voice, sly and nearly innocent-sounding.

Silverstar leaped back to glare at the faceless voice, though only shape and shadow met his furious gaze. "You piece of-"

"Fox-dung?" The shape suggested, strolling out of the brush gracefully, paws seeming to only brush the earth as she walked. "Ooh, or fox-heart? Maybe fox-brained?" The dog-like creature was now clearly illuminated, red fur almost ethereal in the night. Raising her chin defiantly, the vixen copied the cold hatred that lit

up Silverstar's eyes. "Probably the latter. Only a cat would be stupid enough to come alone to face my kind. Do not test me, old one. Your tongue may be sharp, but your senses are dull. It is only a matter of time before even the mice will be able to outwit you."

Claws extended fully, Silverstar growled a warning. "Those kits were not a meal for your worthless tribe, Odi! You will pay, the lot of you," he promised, voice ominous.

"Wrong again!" Odi singsonged, flicking her tail. She barked another laugh, menace tainting the very sound. "You threatened my family; it is you that will pay." And with that, she pounced.

Chapter One

With one deft leap, she was launched into the air on powerful legs, soaring through the sky like the hawk she was aimed for. Her paws left the familiar sensation of grass and earth, replaced by the bitter chill of empty air. A snarl caught in her throat as she jumped - no, *flew* at the bird, claws unsheathed and ready to shred the mangy rabbit-brained hawk that had dared to stray anywhere near CloudClan camp.

Time stood still as she darted upwards, glimpsing the poor kit caught in it's talons, mewling pitifully. *I've gotcha*, she thought, narrowing her eyes as she hooked a claw into the hawk's huge, tawny wing. For a moment, she swayed, only one paw sustaining her awkward position before she was able to get a good grip, much to the utter dismay of the bird. Swinging herself up, she sank her claws into the hawk's flesh, hearing a pained squawk and feeling powerful, dangerous muscles tense under her feet. "Hold on, everything'll be fine!"

The kit nodded tersely, looking sick as she peered out and over the grip of her attacker. "Uh, Doekit?" She asked. "I think now's as good a time as any to admit that I may be afraid of heights."

Doekit frowned, slouching down on her higher perch. There were only two trees in camp, and the DeadTree was forbidden for kits. The thin, short birch was the only source of shade - and fun - that Doekit could get her paws on. Obviously Willowkit would find a problem in that. "Hush," she chided, leaning down to bat at her sister's ear. "It'll add to the realism!"

Willowkit did not share in the excited grin. The poor she-cat looked green from Doekit's perspective, and it most likely wasn't from the foliage. Willowkit was a polar opposite from her sister, in many respects, including the real-time example she had provided. She was timid where Doekit was generally outgoing, a heavy sleeper to her sister's restless habits, and, of course, *not* an adventurer. It was said that Willowkit favored her mother more than Doekit, too, with her

black and white patches and calm demeanor. Though Doekit did share in the bicolored gene-pool, her patches were brown, and her easily excitable nature left a lot of questions unanswered.

Doekit did not know who her father was. While all the cats in the small, tightly-knit clan had visited before, none had stepped forward to answer that question. Her mother had never brought it up on her own, and distractions were common for the young she-cat. It wasn't as if she had never asked, however. Both she and Willowkit had gone on all points of the spectrum from hinting to outright begging.

Birdleap had never taken a mate, nor shown interest in anything other than parenting. If that meant not having a second pair of eyes at her side, then so be it, she had always said. Hopping down from the tree, careful as ever, Willowkit casually mentioned, "Waspclaw said that the Peace Day was coming up."

"Waspclaw told you that?" Doekit asked doubtfully, still not wanting to give up her perch. She felt like she could see the whole territory, as flat as CloudClan's moors were. Grasses swayed in the spring breeze, a wind that carried the fresh scents of heather and goldenrod, mingling with the familiar smells of home. The sun bore down on the land, gleaming on the pelts of her camp-bound clanmates as they bustled about, weaving extra grasses into the barriers, taking fresh moss and feathers to the different nests, or even just cooling in the shade, contented to do nothing for the time being.

"Well, not exactly," Willowkit replied, her voice strained as she made the final leap to the earth. With a small oomph and a bit of extra effort, she managed to land on her paws, somewhat clumsily. "He's not exactly the softest speaker."

Both she-cats shared a chuckle at that. Waspclaw and his brother, Frostwhisker, were the newest warriors, having been christened only two or three moons back. Waspclaw had always been a busy, talkative kit and apprentice, and he hadn't lost his vigor with the titles.

With one last glance out onto the moor, Doekit began her descent,

stumbling down much faster and much more careless than Willowkit had. On the ground, her sister's tail twitched anxiously, one of many signs that she disapproved of Doekit's methods.

Her paws safely rooted to the grassy moor now, Doekit stretched her tense muscles, arching her back and and sticking out her hind legs on by one. Willowkit giggled. "You look like an otter," she mewled, stifling any more laughter.

Doekit stiffened, sniffing haughtily. "I'll have you know that otters are a graceful bunch, and I'd be happy to associate with them."

The fragile dam broke, and a fit of laughter left Willowkit in a frenzy. Both kits giggled uncontrollably, only stopping when a long shadow cast itself over the she-cats.

"Shouldn't you be off causing trouble?"

"Birdleap!" Both kits stood to greet the she-cat, purring as they cozied up to their mother.

"I was just fetching a rabbit from the other side of camp," Birdleap mentioned, gesturing her head to the furscrap at the nursery entrance. "I figured you two would be hungry, and Brackenwing always is." The queen gave a small chuckle, as did her children.

Doekit stumbled onto her paws, desperately trying to forget about the otter incident. Food was a good way to do so, and the grumble of her stomach only proved the fact to be true. At five moons old, Doekit and Willowkit had been eating real foods for a while now. They didn't eat as frequently, now that they had to actually move around to get their fill, rather than just mewling for Birdleap to come to the rescue. It was tasty though, and nothing compared to the hearty meat of a fresh, young hare.

As the family neared the rabbit, so did Brackenwing, the only other queen in camp. Her stomach seemed twice it's normal size, and she was always tired. Brackenwing was enjoyable company, though, when she wasn't sleeping, hungry, or in the medicine den for an overnight stay. This would be her first litter, and her mate, Grasstail, was constantly on alert, always buzzing around the

nursery like a lost honeybee, constantly getting in the way of *secret* missions where *secrecy* was the key. He could at least pretend to be looking the other way when she and Willowkit passed.

"Willowkit said Peace Day was coming up; is that true?" Doekit asked doubtfully as Birdleap divided up the portions.

"In a moon or two, yes," Birdleap replied, unable to mask all of her excitement at the prospect. Peace Day only came once a year, and it was always a joyous time of celebration among the clans and tribes, cats and foxes alike. Mentors trained apprentices in special events, while the bravest warriors relearned battle moves in preparation for the games. Elders would tell wild stories of past quests and prophecies to any young cat that would lend an ear. This year was supposedly MoonClan's turn to host, which would mean traveling to the forest. Having never left camp, Doekit had only ever seen two trees in her entire life, and the very prospect of what something of that nature even *looked* like could and had kept her up all night. If unfortunate events didn't postpone her apprenticeship, she'd be able to compete in the junior events, and she planned to impress whoever she could with her soon-to-have skills.

Doekit took a bite of rabbit, not wanting to let it get too cold, though the sun might have been baking it, for all the heat that graced the moor. "You kits'll have den mates in a few days," Brackenwing mentioned, wonderment edging her words. "Any name suggestions?"

Like Grasstail hasn't already come up with an entire StarClan's worth of names, Doekit thought to herself, positive that now was not a good time to voice her opinion. Instead, she offered up, "What about Otterkit?"

Willowkit nearly spat out her mouthful of food. "Why, that's a lovely name," Brackenwing cooed. "I'll definitely think about it." Her sister tried to conceal her abundant laughter by swallowing the food, though she seemed to be unsuccessful. No matter how much she struggled, her laughter seemed to prevail.

It only took a moment for Doekit to realize that the look in Willowkit's eyes was not shock; it was pure panic. "Willowkit!" She

leaped to her feet, all klutziness unlearned in a split second. In the same instant, both queens were in action.

"Get help," Brackenwing growled fiercely, somehow possessing characteristics of both an icy calm and a blatant fear. Though she looked as if she didn't want to leave her kit, Brackenwing wouldn't have been any good running to grab Russetpelt. Birdleap pelted off, muscles bunching and stretching with effort she hadn't had to use since she had first ducked under the arching roof of the nursery.

Willowkit doubled over, her entire body convulsing as it tried to cough up the piece of rabbit. Pain and fear gripped at her chest, making it even harder to breathe in precious air. Willowkit swayed, her strangled noises more desperate as she fought to both exhale and inhale at once.

Doekit let out a wail of helplessness, lashing her bristling tail in utter defeat. "Can't you do anything else?" She yowled at Brackenwing, who had busied herself in rubbing Willowkit's chest, murmuring soft phrases as she did so. The heavy queen sent a sharp glare Doekit's way, never stopping in her frenzied task.

"I'm doing all I can," she murmured, more to herself than anyone, as if trying to provide assurance in the fact. Her own fur had fluffed out, sticking up all down her scruff and making her seem twice as large. Fear scent ruined the affect, though Doekit wasn't free of the smell either.

Clanmates gathered around the scene, not yet competent of what was going on just yet. Gasps made their way through the crowd, swift as minnows down-stream, causing a ripple throughout the peaceful demeanor that the day had attempted to provide. Doekit wanted to scream at them to get back, to leave her sister be, but at this point, no words would slip off her tongue.

Somecat seemed to notice her presence, letting out a startled humph. Before she knew it, teeth met her scruff, and all she could do was fall limply into the carrying possition, save a vain kick of her hind paw. Every step that her captor took sent a jolt through her body, making her bite her tongue on several occasions. Blood welled from the cuts in her mouth, salty and unpleasant,

threatening to drip from her mouth if she did not swallow.

Out of the corner of her eye, a flash of clay-colored fur bounded by, followed by the familiar smell of flowers; primrose, buttercup, maybe poppy? One of the three - no matter. The heavy, floral smelling figure had been heading straight for the crowd, not even bothering to update Doekit on what was going on.

"May I go back, now?" Doekit hissed, her voice strained from the stress on her throat. She squirmed weakly, knowing full well that her actions did nothing; whoever had grabbed her was much, much stronger.

A snort and a warm current of air were all that she would get in reply, whistling in her ear fur and providing an overall uncomfortable feeling. Doekit would shudder if she could. The voice did seem to comply, slowly lowering her to a soft patch of earth outside of the Warriors' den. She tensed her muscles, needing to further prompt to prepare for a dead sprint.

She wasn't the only one who foresaw the situation, however. "Promise you won't bolt?" Her captor spat through Doekit's scruff.

Torn, Doekit chewed lightly at the inside of her cheek. She *could* lie, but that wouldn't improve her reputation within the clan. Telling the truth wouldn't get her anywhere either; her paws wouldn't even make it to the ground.

With a defeated sigh, Doekit mumbled a small yes, feeling soil under her feet only a moment later. Regaining her balance, she stumbled forward a tail-length or two, turning around and glaring upwards defiantly. Her face fell when her own green eyes met the amused smirk of none other than CloudClan's deputy.

"Bearstep!" Doekit squeaked, her eyes wide.

Bearstep dipped his head, sitting down and flicking his stump of a tail. The story behind the length was a favorite of Willowkit's, typically told by Lilypaw, his apprentice. Since no elders lived in the clan as of now, the apprentices had taken over the duty of passing down stories.

"Russetpelt will take care of your sister," Bearstep meowed, tossing his head in the general direction of the crowd. "She knows what she is doing. Her skill is far beyond her years."

Doekit simply nodded, finding very little comfort in his words. She placed her head on her paws, staring sightlessly at the kit-soft white fur.

Stupid otters, she thought to herself, letting the exhaustion of the day wash over her, closing her eyes and forcing weariness to take hold. Doekit hoped beyond hope that Grasstail's names were better than her choice.

Chapter Two

Author's Note:

I just wanted to thank all of you guys for voting and commenting! It means a lot to me, and honestly just makes me want to write even more! You'd be surprised by how empowering one little button is. I haven't been feeling all that creative in the last week; sorry for the late update! Anyways, I hope you enjoy the chapter, however short it is.

Also, if you were looking for something to do, I'd check out Destiny_Warriors new writing contest, 25 Days, 25 Chapters.

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"And then that mangy hunk of fur went skittering out of there - you should have seen it! His steps were as long as badgers! You would have gotten a kick out of that, Willowkit!"

Doekit muttered something inaudible to the others. Once Russetpelt had allowed visitors, the whole clan seemed to want to be by Willowkit's side, always offering up stories, games, and the softest feathers for her nest. She was coddled and fed and checked on consistently, and breaks in between were far from long. The little she-kit was enveloped in the love of her entire clan.

To be perfectly honest, it had gotten rather annoying rather fast.

Though Doekit was always present for the stories and there for the games, the attention was all on sickly Willowkit. She hated every second of it.

Willowkit didn't seem to mind all the visitors, though she did look a little cramped at times.

Cramped indeed. It had already been two full days, and the bi-colored she-cat was still camped out in the nursery. That meant no exploration, no adventures, and certainly no fun. But, worst of all,

Willowkit wasn't the only cramped one.

Just last night, Brackenwing had brought *four* kits into the world. Three toms and a she-cat. Doekit had decided that her apprentice ceremony couldn't come any sooner.

As of now, Doekit was stretched out by her sister, listening with detached interest as Creampatch wove an intricate story about some old leader that rode on the backs of hawks. Ironically named Earthstar, the old tom was said to have never left the sky, and even spoke to the birds that flew him. He and his army were tasked with chasing out a whole clan of fisher cats that had taken up space along the largest river in the moor.

Doekit had to hold her tongue, lest she call out some words she wasn't supposed to know.

Willowkit seemed to be enjoying the senior warrior's ramblings, however, and all hell would break loose if Doekit even coughed in a negative way. So she busied herself in studying the wall of herbs on the far side of the cave.

The north wall of camp was one big cliff, marking the start of where the territory became rocky and mountainous. At some point, many seasons ago, a powerful river had rampaged through the rock, cutting away what was now the Medicine Den. Only a small pool of water remained, used for drinking, soaking moss, and on rare occasions, entire cats. Doekit had never seen it herself; Russetpelt had told a few stories as well.

Dish-like shelves stored berries and leaves, dried and fresh, both fragrant and sour-smelling. Maybe one of Brackenwing's kits would become a medicine cat. It was hard to say, especially since they had been born not even a full day ago. As far as Doekit knew, they didn't even have names. Brackenwing was still exhausted, rightly so.

Stretching, Doekit stood, ignoring Creampatch as she made her way outside. The full force of Greenleaf hit her face as soon as she stepped into the afternoon sun. To her left, mouth-watering scents wafted from the fresh kill pile, smelling of rabbit and some sort of

bird - wren, maybe. Doekit did her best to push away the thought of food. She had already eaten that morning, and she didn't want to spoil her appetite for dinner. A small voice in her head argued that if breakfast was already a fading memory, a small snack would hardly make an impact. Swaying uncertainly on her paws, Doekit decided that the best option would be to get as far away from the food as possible.

Her paw-steps were quick and short as she padded down from the higher side of camp, steering for the river near the apprentices' den. One couldn't really call it a river, however. It was more of a brook, really, and no water could be found flowing through it. The stream dried up every Greenleaf and froze throughout late Leaf-fall and Leaf-bare, but it made a perfect spot for the younger cats to play mossball and talk about the events of the day. Right now, water still coursed through it, chilled from the mountains. It made her shiver just thinking about it. If she was lucky, Doekit would catch Lilypaw. Even Sandpaw would do, but Rosepaw had never really liked the younger generation. There was nothing wrong with the red tabby, but Doekit had learned at an early age to steer clear of her for now; at least until mid-apprenticeship.

Doekit's chest tightened at what she saw. Sandpaw and Rosepaw were sitting just a little too close, laughing their ears off about something that was probably only funny to one of the two.

Doekit hadn't realized that she had stopped moving, and quickly darted into a conveniently placed patch of grass, narrowing her eyes at the two. It had been no doubt in her mind that Rosepaw had at least mild feelings for the young tom, but hope had probably blinded her to the extent of which their 'relationship' had gone.

It may have seemed to an onlooker that it was Doekit who had the crush. But, it was Willowkit who claimed to be madly in love with Sandpaw. Doekit didn't get the fascination. Ever since Brackenwing and Grasstail had been named a couple, Doekit guessed that her sister had just thought that was what you were supposed to do. Sandpaw was the only tom close to their age at the time, thus he had been the target for Willowkit's admiration.

Doekit still didn't understand.

But, it was her job to protect her sister, (being born twenty-eight seconds prior has that effect) so she would do her best to keep her fragile emotions as safe as she could.

Doekit crouched down, a plan already formulating itself in the more devious part of her brain. In times like these, she had to let the 'Evil Twin' side come out. It proved to work the best in almost all situations. She took a deep, steady breath, and then she padded forward.

The only problem with the camp was that it was typically free of rough stones that Doekit could have used to her advantage. Twigs jutting out of the ground, faults in the earth, even just rough soil would have been nice every once in a while. It was hard to convince herself to go through with it. Her plan did involve plenty of humiliation. Oh, how her reputation would falter. At least se might get out of the nursery for a while.

"Hey, Sandpaw, Rosepaw!" Doekit called, attracting the attention of both apprentices, who turned around much faster than what should have been possible.

"Oh, h-hey, Doekit," Sandpaw replied. Rosepaw simply acknowledged her with a tip of her head.

Here goes nothing, Doekit thought blandly, making sure to land awkwardly on her left paw. With a squeak of faked surprise, the she-kit pitched forward, eyes squeezed shut in preparation for the freezing water below her.

Chapter Three

Though the river wasn't far down, exactly, Doekit felt the affects of her fall as if time itself were counting down, using the steady drop in her stomach as numbers. Some pessimistic voice began to mutter in her head, saying how it hoped she wouldn't die for her efforts. That would most certainly bring the two cats closer.

But everything sped up when she hit the water, going way too fast for what should have been normal, maybe to catch up to the present, perhaps. Fully submerged, Doekit gasped for air, having not taken that into consideration. Water swiftly flooded into the open space, drowning her lungs in the cold fluid. Smooth stones scraped her back, not jagged but still rough, in a sense as she was swiftly dragged away by the stream.

Doekit was vaguely aware, in some far corner of her mind, that she should be trying to breach the surface and inhale much needed air, instead of coughing unproductively whilst slowly running out of oxygen. But, alas, shock had taken control of her movements, leaving her immobile for the time.

Sure enough, just as she had predicted, Doekit did *not,* in fact, die in a watery grave. Teeth met her scruff, sharp and careless in their owner's panic. She was roughly dragged up and out of the stream, dripping from head to tail and shivering uncontrollably. Eyes squeezed shut, she could only listen with little interest as cats swarmed around her like bees, whispering animatedly and rasping their tongues over her head. At one point, someone had decided it was a good idea to lick her fur backwards.

While this may have been drying her quicker than normal, it was extremely uncomfortable, and she couldn't help but squirm like there were bugs burrowing through her fur. Mewled protests slipped from her tongue, going unnoticed by what felt like dozens of cats all at once. Briefly, Doekit wondered if her attempted sabotage had worked, and noted that she should probably come up with less drastic means of getting her way in the future.

"Doekit, are you alright?"

"Doekit, swallow these."

"What in StarClan's name just happened?"

Doekit grumbled out something that was obviously unintelligible to the others, probably sounding more like gibberish than words. She was only vaguely aware of being dragged off before being swallowed by a warm, suffocating blackness as she slipped into unconsciousness.

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Squished. That was the first thing that Doekit realized as she woke, her eyes crusted with sleep and her fur matted and clammy. On all sides, something - or someone - was covering her, pressing in on her. All she wanted to do was squirm away, but her muscles wouldn't work; it was if she was yelling at a pile of rocks - unresponsive and useless.

Doekit somehow managed to force her eyes open, pressing past a thick layer of grime and filth to blink up blearily at the walls of a den. But it wasn't her den... No, she didn't live in a cave. Maybe she had fallen asleep with Willowkit. No, Willowkit was supposed to be back at the nursery that afternoon, right?

So then why was she in the medicine den?

Suddenly, as if a clap of thunder had shook the very recesses of her mind, Doekit remembered what had happened. It was only blurry bits and pieces, but enough to get the whole story. *River, Sandpaw, Rosepaw, falling, drowning, so,* so *cold...*

Doekit quaked at the remembrance of her fall, still feeling icy claws gripping at her throat. She opened her eyes once more, blinking rapidly to clear the lingering bleariness.

From what she could tell, she was completely alone. Only the sharp scent of herbs permeated the air, as well as the lingering traces of other cats, indecipherable in their numbers. Doekit couldn't even raise her head to look around, and only the tip of her tail was

willing to twitch in unrestrained irritation.

After a few moments, Doekit had grown bored. She wasn't even able to roll onto her side, as fatigued as she was. All she could do was wait.

And wait...

And wait...

Doekit hated waiting.

Finally, after what seemed like moons, a thin, red shape pressed it's way through the entrance to the den, starting when it realized that Doekit was awake, and very irritated.

"Oh, no, I just ran out to grab some herbs!" Russetpelt gestured wildly to something behind her, apologizing swiftly and scooting away from the entrance to allow another cat to squeeze in.

None other than Sandpaw made his way in, his jaws full of leafy herbs. A sour tang followed the tom inside, and he obviously noticed it too, if his scrunched up muzzle was anything to go by. He mumbled a greeting through the bundle before spitting them out on the floor, obviously not pleased with the taste they left behind.

"Oh, hush," Russetpelt meowed, flicking her tail over Sandpaw's mouth before he could say a word against the task. He simply heaved a sigh before acknowledging Doekit once again.

"You're finally awake!" He called, an excited, yet nervous tone to his voice.

Why wouldn't I be? Doekit wanted to ask, but her words slurred, getting jumbled up on the way from her head to her tongue.

Russetpelt murmured something quietly for only the young tom to hear. Doekit wanted to protest, but remembered how words seemed to escape her right now. She shut her mouth abruptly, waiting (again) for the two to remember her once more.

After a moment, Sandpaw nodded, his bright yellow eyes just a bit

wider than they had been before. He turned back to Doekit, much to her approval, and came forward a bit, sitting down in the vacant nest next to hers.

"How are you feeling?" He asked, his voice a bit more quiet than before.

Doekit rolled her eyes, sending him a distasteful glare. He snorted, shaking his head. "I deserved that."

"You've been sleeping for a few days now," he mentioned casually, as if it wasn't a big deal that she had missed out on that much time.

"Not sleeping, exactly," Russetpelt meowed from across the den, where she was sorting the new herbs into their proper places. "You were unconscious, more like. You did wake up a few times, but your sickness kept you a bit delirious. You wouldn't remember any of it if you tried."

Russetpelt was right. Doekit's head hurt just thinking about what had happened.

"You have hyp- hypa-"

"Hypothermia, dear, don't hurt yourself," Russetpelt interrupted Sandpaw, her voice curt and motherly. Sandpaw gave an indignant huff, and turned away, his tail lashing once and then going still over the moss.

Doekit couldn't help but giggle, even though it made every bone in her body ache.

"Well, you'll probably need some rest," Sandpaw meowed, still looking rather annoyed at Russetpelt. She was his elder sister, after all. "I think Rosepaw was looking for me..." He added thoughtfully, excusing himself and waving his tail in goodbye as he made his way outside once more.

Doekit felt dread sink in her belly like a heavy stone. So her plan hadn't worked, after all. Probably due to her sleeping forever and a half. Now her... Her hypo-whatnot was for nothing! Doekit let out a groan as soon as Sandpaw had left, closing her eyes.

"You alright?" Russetpelt asked, darting to the she-kit's side in three long strides.

Doekit looked up at her, exasperation clear in her eyes. She moaned something that resembled a yes, but only just. Russetpelt seemed to understand. The red she-cat padded off, back to her sorting, most likely.

The young kit had never really understood why someone would want to be a medicine cat. Sure, you got to connect with StarClan and share bonds with your clanmates that you wouldn't typically share, but to give up hunting and fighting for stinky herbs? Never. The one thing she agreed with was the whole 'no mates' policy. Doekit still didn't understand what all the buzz was about. What would you even do with a mate, anyways? It was just like having a friend, but with a significant title. Her mother didn't have a mate, and she was perfectly fine!

Well, it didn't really matter now. What with her being ill, Doekit had plenty of time to come up with a new scheme, one that didn't involve her being severely injured and/or traumatized. In her defense, she hadn't really imagined the outcome of her original plan. She still wasn't exactly sure what had happened, especially when she was out.

"Doekit! You're awake!"

Speak of the devil... Doekit cracked open one eye, squinting angrily as Willowkit bounded up, already excitedly talking about anything and everything that came to mind. Behind her, Birdleap followed, working hard to swallow the worry in her expression.

"Why did you go swimming in the river?" Willowkit asked sternly, her brow cocked in her imitation of 'serious'.

Doekit said nothing, knowing just how her sister would react, and her mother, too. She just blinked up at the pair, her tail flicking once more in agitation.

Birdleap settled down beside her daughter, curling around Doekit's body and starting to groom the kit, her tongue rasping gently over

her ruffled head. It was like she was two moons old again, and the relaxing thrum of their combined purrs soon lulled her into a drowsy state. Willowkit joined them, her own warmth adding to the mix.

It was peaceful and calm, and all ill feelings seemed to seep out of her body. When sleep finally came, Doekit welcomed it openly, and slipped back into fitful dreams of smoke and fire.

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Author's Note:

Just thought I should clarify that Sandpaw was not being a pedophile; he did watch her fall into a river, so he wanted to see if she was alright. Also, innocent Doekit up there because I can. Hope you liked the chapter! Make sure to vote and comment your opinions!

Chapter Four

Unforeseen circumstances *did* end up preventing Doekit from becoming an apprentice. Who saw that coming? With her form of reputation, however, Doekit had thought that her antics would get her into trouble, but it was, in fact the hypodisease that kept her cooped up in the medicine den for over a week's time.

Three days prior, Willowkit had become an apprentice, and she had surprisingly held her tongue about it, choosing instead to talk about how amazing it would be to train together. Willowki-paw had already been out to see the territory, and had been practicing her hunter's crouch nonstop. The good thing was that she was able to get closer to Sandpaw, which gave Doekit at least *some* satisfaction.

Now, it was her turn. Her brown and white fur had been groomed to near perfection, so clean and neat that even her own mother had looked twice when she saw her kit heading out of the medicine den (Russetpelt had insisted that she took one more dose of medicine before going out onto such a tall establishment). Doekit gave her shoulder a nervous lick, butterflies stirring in her empty stomach. Her appetite had left her in the past few days, but now she was starting to feel the effects of not eating. That starling on the fresh kill pile looked so inviting...

Doekit was snapped out of her trance when Mothstar cleared her throat, nodding to the kit as she passed by. Her muscles coiled under her bushy pelt as she leaped up, beginning to climb the Dead Tree with the utmost certainty, her paw steps seeming to direct themselves.

The brown tabby called out, her practiced voice carrying throughout the camp. Warriors and apprentices alike poked their heads out of dens and looked up from conversations, curious looks on each. Those who hadn't already heard and assembled padded over, joining Doekit's mother, sister, and a few others under the shadow of the massive trunk.

The Dead Tree had been in camp for seasons upon seasons, acting as a meeting place and den for the leader. A hole at the base, sheltered by moss draped over interlocking roots, served as the den. Not that Doekit had ever been in there.

Well...

Mothstar hushed the crowd with a simple flick of her tail, the silence settling expectantly over the gathered cats. Doekit repressed the urge to shiver. "Gathered companions," she began, a bit quieter now that everyone was in earshot, but still very loud.

"We gather to witness the inauguration of Doekit, who has reached the age of six moons and is ready to become an apprentice. Our heavenly guardians will looks down upon her as she takes on the challenges of the outside world, starting with the first ritual." Mothstar paused to look back down at Doekit, who was having trouble breathing correctly. "If you would join me on the Dead Tree, young one."

Doekit had seen it before; all a cat had to do to become an apprentice was climb up the spindly, slippery branches of the tree, and then they would receive their mentor and make their den. With her experience in climbing the nursery tree, she should be able to scale it rather easily.

Preparing herself, Doekit crouched, doing a little shimmy as she got into a comfortable position. Then, as if leaping onto the back of the hawk that had always plagued her games, she jumped, soaring through the air to dangle precariously from a low hanging branch. It was only about a foot and a half off the ground. Doekit choked back a frustrated hiss, instead focusing her energies on the next branch, already feeling slight traces of fatigue in her short legs.

It went on like that for quite a while, but the branches were growing farther apart. She was so close, she could taste the gales of the mountains, feel wildflowers under her paws. The last jump.

The branch itself was distinguished by several deep claw marks at the base, so Doekit knew it wasn't just some poor cat sliding off of it. The wind up here (though only being several fox-lengths above

the ground) was colder than that of the ground, almost fresher. But it was also stronger, picking up the neatly groomed fur of Doekit's body and tugging it gently, as if to suggest she just fall back. She decided to decline that offer.

If she jumped with enough force, she might just be able to snag the top branch. She could feel the presence of many cats clustering the bottom, there to catch her if she slipped. That wouldn't happen. She would prevail.

Eyes narrowed in determination, Doekit flung herself across the gap, up toward the next branch. Her left forepaw caught, lurching her shoulder in a painful way. She resisted the urge to cry out in pain; a whimper only she could hear would suffice.

Then, claws scrabbling on the barkless surface, she hauled herself up. Eyes closed, panting like there was no tomorrow, she allowed herself a moment of pride.

The booming voice of Mothstar sounded from somewhere above her, and Doekit forced herself to clamber to her feet, not putting full weight on her left foot. "Doekit has successfully climbed the Dead Tree, and as tradition states, is now a full apprentice of CloudClan!"

She beamed, her pale green eyes lighting up with excitement. She had done it! There was no time to think about climbing down - now was a moment for celebration. The cats below her seemed to think so too, and Mothstar allowed a moment for congratulatory cheers.

There weren't many options for her mentor. CloudClan was small after the terrible Leafbare they had had to suffer through, and most were lucky to have survived. The senior warriors had already been taken, and now the more inexperienced were left.

Doekit didn't let that discourage her. She tuned back into Mothstar. "-courage and skill in battle. Riverstripe, I would like you to mentor Doepaw."

Doeki-paw stiffened at the sound of her new name. It felt odd in her mouth when she whispered it to Willowpaw, who seemed to be

barely restraining her urge to jump up and down. That was her now. Doepaw.

Below her, cats began to cheer her name. Each time she heard it, the sound became more solid in her mind. Doepaw, Doepaw, Doepaw. It was a good sound.

Riverstripe clambered up, his grey tabby fur bristling out in all directions. It was common knowledge that he barely groomed it. Doepaw would get along with him just fine. The two touched noses briefly before turning back to the crowd.

"You'll be the best apprentice out there," he mumbled under his breath, his amber eyes flicking briefly to Doekit.

"I know."

Riverstripe seemed to think it was funny, because a chortling laugh pressed past his defenses. Doepaw didn't really find the humor in it, but if that was something that made him laugh, then so be it.

Cats soon began to go back to what they were doing, and Bearstep started to dish out patrols and hunting parties for the day. "Did you need some help getting down?" Riverstripe asked, gesturing to her shoulder.

Doepaw nodded sheepishly, embarrassment making her ears hot. Riverstripe grabbed her scruff gently, doing his best not to bite her as he hopped down from limb to limb.

"Thanks," Doepaw muttered, relief surging through her paws as they felt the dry earth once more.

"You should go see Russetpelt about your shoulder," he replied, completely blowing off her gratitude. "I'd rather have an apprentice that can walk than an apprentice who stays behind to get better."

Doepaw nodded, trudging off to go see Russetpelt yet again.

Later that day, as she was meticulously putting together her nest, Doepaw heard voices outside of the den. The right thing to do would be to politely ignore them. So Doepaw swiveled her ears,

interest sharpening the gleam in her eyes.

The apprentice's den, as Doepaw had found out, was rather soundproof. The fallen log was draped with mosses and lichens that basically assured nothing would pass to unwelcome ears.

So Doepaw edited the architecture, just slightly. She made sure that her nest was carefully positioned by the rotting half of the log. While it didn't smell as good as the rest of the place, it was easy to break a small hole in the wall.

Doepaw pressed her ear to the hole, where she was able to hear snippets of the conversation. She could just barely make out the voice of her sister and maybe Sandpaw? She couldn't be too sure, but Willowpaw didn't really have any reason to talk to any other young toms.

"-for helping me with that catch back there." That was Willowpaw, and she sounded embarrassed, maybe a bit annoyed with herself?

"It was no problem! It really was all you. I just pointed out some flaws in your crouch." That had to be Sandpaw. His tone was way more casual, as if his entire existence hadn't been leading up to that conversation.

The two carried on this way for a while, each springing the polite compliments onto the other before saying their goodbyes and going their separate ways.

Doepaw darted away from the hole, frantically patching it up with moss as her sister flounced in, a dreamy look in her eyes. Willowpaw fell back into her nest, a purr rumbling in her throat.

"Had fun, I see," Doepaw stated blandly, making sure she was positioned in a non-suspicious manner.

"You don't know the half of it!" Willowpaw cooed, a giggle lacing her words.

While that wasn't necessarily true, (Doepaw actually knew about three fourths of it, maybe four fifths.) she encouraged her sister to reminisce, getting comfortable in her new home as Willowpaw went

on about what a great hunter Sandpaw was.

The she-cat seemed to tire herself out rather fast, and cats had already started to join them in the den, so Willowpaw stopped talking soon enough. Doepaw curled into a ball, her nose buried in her tail.

It was odd, not sharing a nest with Birdleap. The space felt empty and unloved, even with the presence of so many other cats. Sleep took it's time finding her, but it eventually came, and with it, a new day for her to begin her apprenticehood.

Chapter Five

Green eyes pierced the thin curtain of the night, sweeping keenly through thickly-set grasses. Pawsteps, silent over dry earth, led shapeless figures through a twisting dance of pathways. Not a word was uttered; everyone there knew what to do and how to do it.

Among the crowd, Doepaw crept beside her mentor, Riverstripe. It was her first patrol, and she was determined to not mess anything up. But she was *hungry*. A hungry Doepaw never mixed with silence.

Her stomach rumbled ominously, growling like a wildcat. Riverstripe gave her a sharp look. Doepaw would have apologized, but they were investigating something important, and they didn't want to scare away the evidence.

It had been about three weeks since Doepaw had become an official apprentice of CloudClan. Just in time, too; Brackenwing's four kits had just started to become active. The three toms were already finding trouble in the simplest of things, and the she-cat wasn't much better. Though she acted innocent enough, Doepaw could just tell that she was the ring leader. Their names suited them well - Cougarkit, Thornkit, Stormkit, and Hollykit - they were all potentially harmful nuisances.

Doepaw preferred it out here, with the open sky above her and an endless horizon in front. She could explore for hours, (and she had) but she had a job to do. A hunting party had recently reported a nest of eagles on the northern border, where the terrain became mountainous and the air became sharp with the scent of their neighbor, the Colony of Neaniti. Doepaw had deducted that the smell of fox would forever be lodged up her nostrils.

Ahead of mentor and apprentice, the leader of the patrol, Pinebristle, walked alongside Frostwhisker and Creampatch. Pinebristle was Mothstar's sister, and the resemblance was uncanny. It was like staring at an exact copy.

Underfoot, the grass soon gave away to rough stones as they trailed up the steep side of a hill. Doepaw's feet were already starting to ache; she would need to get some dock for her pawpads. She opened her mouth to complain, a whine already on her tongue, but shut it abruptly. She wasn't a kit anymore. She had to learn to swallow the pain and just trudge on.

Being an adult was hard.

Scraggly trees soon began to jut out from the earth, altitude altering their growth into odd, abstract shapes. Leaves were scarce, and most had none at all. Doepaw suppressed a shiver, keeping her head down as they padded through the graveyard of stunted growth. It was a fitting nickname, now that Doepaw thought about it.

Riverstripe seemed to notice his apprentice's unease, and he brushed against her, sending a comforting look in her direction. Doepaw tried to return the favor, but the grimace in her smile must not have been all that genuine. Though there was a silent agreement that everyone should remain quiet, Riverstripe still whispered, "You won't have to come here again this late."

Doepaw simply nodded, ears pressed back against her head. Pinebristle flicked her tail, stopping the patrol in it's tracks. Above them, what had to be the most deformed tree of them all rose up to brush the stars with spindly branches. Leaf matter crept down from nooks in branches, old and composting from a time where leaves still did their best to nourish the plant. The group's purpose here became clear when Doepaw spotted, in some of the top most branches, an impossibly big nest, spilling over with twigs and feathers.

She heard a small gasp coming from somewhere in the group - she wouldn't have been surprised if the noise was made by her, actually. Eagles were way bigger than she had imagined, if that nest truly was the correct size for a small family. They would be massacred.

"No one's home," Pinebristle meowed quietly, her voice barely louder than Doepaw's breathing, which had gotten steadily faster as she realized the odds of success. "I'm going up to check it out."

"What?" Frostwhisker yowled quietly. Doepaw noted the fur that rose up along his neck. "We can see it fine from this distance, I'm sure." His terror at the prospect was clear in the way he spoke.

Pinebristle sent him a glare before scampering up to the base of the tree, continuing to ignore her clanmates' dread. As she worked her way up to the nest, Doepaw kneaded the ground with her claws, discomfort prickling along her spine. Fear scent was sharp and sour on the breeze, blowing off towards the moors of CloudClan territory. The buzz of cicadas seemed to mock the party. Taunting trills of night insects swarmed from all around. Pinebristle still seemed unbothered.

The tabby she-cat peered down from her spot inside the nest, determination clear in her expression. "There are eggs," she called down. "I'm going to knock them down."

Her shaggy head disappeared once more, followed by a faint grunting noise as she tussled with her package. Then, a tawny-spotted egg came tumbling out, only giving Doepaw a brief chance to look before it spattered on the rocky floor. A sickening yellow sludge puddled down the side, and Creampatch sidestepped to avoid getting her paws dirty. Two more followed, and then Pinebristle's head reappeared, grinning.

She quickly clambered down, her tail swishing behind her and catching on the nubs that sprouted from the deformed bark of the outpost. As Pinebristle made the final jump back down to the ground, Doepaw could finally see the smug smile on her face. "That's taken care of," she said, beckoning the patrol to follow her.

"There are still two eagles, now even angrier than they could have been before," Riverstripe hissed, echoing the exact thoughts Doepaw was just going to bring up.

Pinebristle lashed her tail, a snarl finding it's way to her muzzle. "And what was your plan, huh?" She snapped at the younger warrior. "What about five cocky birds of prey, three of which are pubescent and hungry for the flesh of something bigger than rabbits?"

The tension lay like a sheet of honey between the two - thick, messy, and not easy to get rid of. For the first time, Doepaw wondered if there was some sort of history between the two tabbies. It was entirely probable.

Riverstripe's amber eyes met her own, and Doepaw looked away quickly, feeling as if she and the rest of the patrol were intruding on something private.

"We should go," Creampatch said, breaking the ice. "Y'know, eagles and whatnot." She looked prepared to have her ears shredded.

After a moment, Pinebristle nodded, lashing her tail once more before leading the cats once more through the graveyard of stunted growth. She was glad that MoonClan forests weren't anything like that. It would make it easier to climb, and all, but the effect of all those dead trees bending over to snag the tails of unsuspecting cats made her uneasy. It was best that she got out into open sky once more.

Doepaw found herself walking beside Frostwhisker, fearing the cold in Riverstripe's eyes. The young tom had always been nice, but he was quiet and kept to himself.

His whiskers, long and white, twitched in amusement, peering at her through the corners of striking yellow eyes. "Aren't you a little young for me?" He asked, his tone amused, and nothing more.

Doepaw felt her ears flush, and she looked away. She hadn't realized that she had been staring. "Sorry," she mumbled, stumbling a little on the uneven ground.

"It's nothing," he meowed quickly, seeming afraid for the apprentice's feelings. Doepaw felt herself stiffen a bit, but she relaxed just as fast.

And then, "Sorry, too."

Doepaw prided herself on never feeling anything for a tom, and this was definitely one of those situations. The heat in her face was embarrassment, and the stumble was carelessness. It was obviously

nothing more.

Frostwhisker seemed to understand that it wasn't really a time for chatting. He went silent, and the uncomfortable nature of the conversation dropped along with the conversation itself. Besides, he was a *warrior*. Doepaw shouldn't have had to reassure herself in that.

"What would you have done back there?" Frostwhisker asked, the question coming out of nowhere.

Doepaw had to think. Both Pinebristle and Riverstripe had had their points. It was a tough question, really.

"What's right." Her tone had enough formality to dissuade him from asking what she meant by that.

The walk back carried on like that, with everyone deep in thought. Doepaw couldn't stop her eyes from wandering to Frostwhisker's sleek form as they slid through the tall grass like minnows through water.

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Author's Note:

*Probably gonna become a regular thing. Anyways, Doepaw now has a crush on an older guy *wiggles eyebrows*. I don't actually know if I want anything to come out of it. Who do you guys ship Doepaw with?! Also, what would you have done up there? I'm just curious. Thanks for reading!*

-Cresci

Chapter Six

The fragile heat spell that had graced the moor soon fell away, leaving behind a familiar nip in the air. The very night that the patrol had set out, in fact, was the night of which the chill set in.

Doepaw hated the cold. She had thought that they were done with it for the season, and she saw no reason as to why Leaf-bare needed to make a surprise appearance.

Her fur fluffed out to twice it's size (which wasn't actually that large), Doepaw watched from the apprentices' den as Willowpaw fetched a moorhen for them to share. Her sister had no problem with any kinds of temperatures, it seemed, and was happily engaged in a conversation with Creampatch, her mentor. Doepaw felt like yelling at her to hurry up, but that would've just been rude.

Willowpaw seemed to notice the impatience that her sister was giving off, and waved her tail in a hasty good-bye. The two sisters moved a bit deeper into the den to share the meal. Doepaw would have to admit - the one good thing about the insulation was the warmth that this place retained. The space had gone from cramped to cozy in a matter of degrees overnight.

"I'm going out on dawn patrol," Willowpaw mentioned, sinking her teeth into the fat on the stomach of the bird.

Doepaw nodded. "Who's going with you?" She prompted. She preferred the meat on the wings, personally, but she didn't really enjoy birds in general. She preferred rabbits and mice, as well as others that fit the category of rodent.

Willowpaw finished chewing before she spoke. "Creampatch, obviously, Toadsong, Frostwhisker, and me."

Doepaw's stomach fluttered at the sound of his name. She couldn't help the look in her eyes - oh, why did toms have to be so cruel?

Willowpaw seemed to notice rather quickly. She skipped over the introductory piece and went straight to her list of concerns:

"Isn't he a little old?"

"*I* thought he liked Nettleclaw-"

"She's twice his age, dingbat," Doepaw cut in.

"O-oh, uh, well how old is he?"

Doepaw made a shrugging motion and took a bite. The thorn poking at her stomach was becoming insistent, now. "Does it matter?" She mumbled through the moorhen.

"Well, you wouldn't go off and have kits with Bearstep, would you?" Willowpaw asked incredulously. She was starting to get rather loud, now that she was losing the argument.

"What about me?" Bearstep asked, his massive head poking through the opening to the apprentice's den.

Willowpaw's patches of white fur seemed just a bit paler in that moment.

"We were talking about last night's eagle watch," Doepaw said swiftly. "Willowpaw thought that you had gone on it, and I had to convince her otherwise." She had to hold her tongue to keep from laughing.

Willowpaw sent her a look of gratitude, nodding along to the story.

"Well, Willowpaw, the dawn patrol is waiting," he meowed. "And I think your mentor was looking for you, Doepaw." He back out of the den, probably off to administer the hunting patrols for the day.

Doepaw gave a small sigh, stuffing as much moorhen into her mouth as she could before following Willowpaw out of the den. She was still hungry, but at least she wouldn't have to trek across the territory again. With luck, she would be practicing something small, like her hunter's crouch.

Riverstripe meowed a terse 'good morning', obviously tired as well from the adventure last night. Doepaw yawned in response. The two cats watched as hunting parties set out, silence stretching between them for a while.

"We'll be battle training with Lilypaw," Riverstripe meowed.

Doepaw cursed under her breath. While she had grown close to the older apprentice, her muscles still ached from all the walking she had done. She voiced that complaint, muttering about the pains in her paws with vivid vocabulary. Riverstripe seemed amused.

She followed after the tom, anyways; she may have been complaining, but she was compliant. The two padded through the grasses, following nearly indiscernible pathways, treaded for seasons but still only known to CloudClan alone.

The training area wasn't too far from camp, just a short walk towards a clearing in the grasses underneath a small aspen. The space was large enough to accompany a large crowd, and could compensate for the rolling and twisting that came with battle training. Lilypaw and her mentor, Bearstep, weren't there yet for obvious reasons.

"What'll we be learning today?" Doepaw asked. A lazy, white butterfly fluttered overhead, and she couldn't help but reach up to bat at it with sheathed claws.

"How to defend yourself from foxes," Riverstripe meowed back, getting comfortable beside the tree.

Doepaw's interest spiked at that, and the butterfly flew off, forgotten. It was well known that many tribes and colonies of foxes had taken up the space directly north of the three clans of cats. Their clan's closest neighbor, the Colony of Neaniti, was one of the smaller, more peaceful groups. They had gotten lucky.

Still, conflict erupted from time to time, and it was useful to learn strategies one could use against the larger, more powerful creatures. Doepaw was surprised that Riverstripe had thought she was ready this early into her training.

"Lilypaw already knows the basic techniques, but it will be good for her to brush up on them. When we leave, she'll be learning some of the more advanced techniques," Riverstripe meowed.

Doepaw nodded, licking her chest fur nervously. Though she wouldn't say anything just yet, she was a bit nervous about facing Lilypaw. It would be hard to beat the more experienced apprentice. She was glad that their claws would be sheathed.

"Sorry for being so late," Bearstep called as he padded into the clearing, Lilypaw trailing behind him. She seemed to be having trouble keeping up with the larger cat, and had to lengthen her strides just to remain in his vicinity.

Lilypaw flicked her ear in greeting, sitting down next to Doepaw much like their mentors did. Both pairs conversed quietly, one a bit more excited than the other.

"Isn't this great? I love the idea that we could potentially bring down something so much bigger than us. It's a bit inspiring, you know?" Lilypaw rambled.

Doepaw gave a meek nod, not willing to share her insecurities about the fight to her partner, who was becoming louder by the second.

Riverstripe gave a nod to Bearstep, who kneaded the earth with his claws impatiently, and the silver tabby approached the apprentices.

"When fighting foxes, you need to use their size against them," he began.

Doepaw didn't understand that. How would you use something's *size*, of all things, against them? If you pitted Bearstep against Lilypaw, the older tom would obviously win unless his apprentice fought dirty.

"Foxes can't move as fast as we can. If you can take advantage of that, there is a chance of beating them. I personally wouldn't advise you to go up against a fox on your own. You should find a partner to battle with.

"Just like cats, foxes have vulnerable underbellies. Eyes and ears are a good target as well. Tails, too, if you don't mind getting a mouthful of fur." Riverstripe swiped his tongue over his muzzle as if reminded of the sensation.

"But that's not the point. If you can find a weakness, you and your partner-" Lilypaw and Doepaw shared a glance. "Must be in perfect synchronization whilst fighting. Since we don't exactly have any foxes with us, Bearstep will be our target."

The huge, grey tom stretched luxuriously, his eyes amused at being named a fox for the day. Doepaw felt her mouth go dry.

She had thought that she would be fighting *Lilypaw*, not this brute of a cat! StarClan forbid if she ever had to go up against a cat of his stature in a real battle...

Riverstripe padded over to the aspen, leaping up onto the lowest bow, where he would be safe. Doepaw wished she would be able to join him.

Bearstep crouched low in front of the two she-cats, his tail lashing in anticipation.

"Begin."

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Author's Note:

Guess who needs to work on battle scenes. Anyhow, I'm a bit disappointed by the length of chapters . I want to make them longer, but I'm not sure. Are they alright? I don't know. Anyways, thanks for reading!

-Cresci

Chapter Seven

"Begin."

Bearstep braced for the leap with a second to spare, as his apprentice moved to bowl him over. She was met with tense muscles and a swat to the head, one that she dodged narrowly.

"That's not how you attack foxes," Riverstripe chastised from above.

Lilypaw darted back in, this time feigning a bat to the left. At the last second, she ducked under what would have been a stinging blow to nip at the opposite foot. Bearstep reared onto his hind legs, ears back against his head. The pale she-cat took this as her chance and darted under him, pawing frantically with sheathed claws at his underbelly. She weaved out between his legs just in time to avoid the crushing force of the larger cat.

"Doepaw, what are you doing?!"

Doepaw looked up sheepishly, closing her muzzle.

"Get out there and help your partner!"

Without a second to think about her plan, Doepaw darted into the fray, fear spiking the fur along her neck. She couldn't hope to match Lilypaw's level of expertise; while the other apprentice may have been perky and clumsy, she really knew how to fight. Why wouldn't she, with the powerful deputy as her mentor? Doepaw would just end up getting in her way.

"How can I help?" She asked breathily, ducking under a swipe that was aimed for her muzzle.

"Distract," was all that Lilypaw had to say. Doepaw could work with that.

The bicolored she-cat waited for an opening impatiently, all the while hardly avoiding cuffs to her ears. Most blows connected, but

she couldn't afford to move.

As Lilypaw dealt with a Bearstep's forepaws, Doepaw crept hastily around the massive figure. Paws spread wide for extra grip, she pounced on top of the warrior, moving to 'bite' at his scruff. He reared back again, effectively opening a hole in his defenses. Also, effectively knocking Doepaw from his back.

She toppled off with a squeak, landing hard with not enough time to roll into the air. The breath knocked from her lungs, Doepaw panted heavily. A curtain of black fell across her vision for a minute as she struggled to breath. White spots fizzed in and out of focus, but she had to get back up.

With a heave of effort, she rolled onto her stomach and then to her paws. Slowly but surely, she formed a grasp on her own inhaling and exhaling.

When she bothered to take notice, Lilypaw had her forepaws placed firmly on Bearstep's chest, holding him down. She was grinning wildly, matching the pride that radiated from her mentor's own expression.

"Great job, Lilypaw! Now we just need a real fox." Bearstep chuckled, pushing her off and standing quickly. He shook out his shaggy grey fur, sending dust flying everywhere.

Doepaw held back an indignant reply, settling for a hiss that reverberated in her throat. Riverstripe joined her beside the other pair, shooting her an empathetic look.

"Bearstep only compliments his own apprentices. Trust me, I've seen enough of his training sessions to know that. You posed a great distraction, Doepaw." The silver tabby nudged her with his shoulder, and she looked back up at him. "Why don't you go back to camp? I'm sure you're even more exhausted now."

Doepaw nodded curtly. She was tired, and her breathing was still hitched and ragged. She nodded to Lilypaw as she left, carefully avoiding Bearstep's questioning gaze. Already, mixed feelings had sprung up about the deputy. She didn't feel like wasting what little

words she could muster, anyhow. She left the clearing, slightly less excited than before.

Riverstripe tailed after her as they walked back to camp. Grass tickled at her whiskers, brushing up against her chin and belly fur. She didn't mind the sensation - she had gotten used to it over time.

"I could really go for a nice, fat field mouse," Riverstripe meowed, finally having caught up and now walking alongside Doepaw.

The apprentice purred in agreement, already tasting the meat on her tongue. Lucky enough for her, there weren't any in the fresh kill pile. It was rather empty, actually. The first hunting party probably hadn't returned just yet, maybe going farther than normal to grab some of the rabbits on the borders. SunClan tended to cultivate the biggest hares. Though no cats strayed across for a simple meal, the rabbits didn't have that restraint that borders provided.

Doepaw wondered for the first time in a long time why cats hadn't grouped together as one instead of creating rivalries and scent markers to discourage mingling and bonding. It was too late now - there was no way to knock down moons and moons of fighting and hatred in a single sweep and unite the field cats, moor cats, and forest cats as one. But a she-cat could dream, right?

"Doepaw!" She whirled around at the sound of her name, and was met with the eager expression of Sandpaw. "Did you want to help us finish this rabbit?" And Rosepaw, slightly less eager. Doepaw had to admit, the red tabby was excellent at hiding her emotions.

Doepaw called back an affirmation and padded over, nodding to Rosepaw and purring a polite greeting to Sandpaw. The meal was scrawny, maybe enough for two warriors but too much for the younger cats alone.

Doepaw dug in, taking her time so as not to upset her barely-filled stomach. It was much better than the moorhen she had shared with Willowpaw.

"You were battle training with Lilypaw, right? What happened to that?" Rosepaw asked casually.

Doepaw swallowed, formulating her answer in the short time she had. "Well, I went out on that eagle patrol last night," she began, careful to keep the smug edge to her tone about being on such an important mission. "And Lilypaw had to do some more advanced things to prepare for her warrior ceremony. So it was best that I got out of the way." She shrugged simply.

"That's right! You guys are going to be warriors soon!" Sandpaw exclaimed, as if Lilypaw's eternal boasting had slipped his mind. "We'll miss your snoring in the apprentices' den," he teased.

Rosepaw stuck her tongue out. "I don't snore! I'm sure you're just hearing yourself." She beamed, leaning in subtly.

Doepaw felt like she was going to be sick. She stood abruptly, startling the two cats out of their little daze.

"I think I heard Birdleap calling me," she lied swiftly, turning away from her denmates and padding off swiftly. If she ever ended up like that, she'd have to have Willowpaw cuff her over the ears to undo the damage that couples were prone to suffer.

Couples. *Blech.*

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Author's Note:

Long time no see, eh? Now that the 25Days25Chapters contest has been discontinued, updates on Cascade will come more frequently. I was in a bit of a rut from the last chapter, too, because I still suck at battle scenes. I'll be perfecting that, hopefully. You should expect an update by next week at the latest.

-Cresci

Brief A/N

Hello! So, um, sorry bout that. My original intention was to finish (yes, *finish*) Chapter Eight in this past week, but at the time, I wasn't aware of how little time I would get to myself on the family vacation. I will finish the draft tonight, even if it kills me. It will be edited tomorrow and hopefully released! Unless it actually kills me.

Now, about surpassing 100 votes; HOLY CRAP YOU GUYS. I'm beyond *thrilled* with the support I've received for Cascade, and I feel terrible for neglecting my project here.

This is starting to become more than brief, but I have one last thing to say. So, school is starting on the 6th, and that means I won't be as frequent with my updates, especially because I have advanced art (I know, right? How the hell did I manage that?) during study period. Or maybe I'll be even more frequent. I'm not really sure. I did begin Cascade during early June, and maintained it for a while until I posted the prologue during summer vacation. I think.

To sum it all up- sorry, love you, but our relationship might need to take a break.

-Cresci

Chapter Eight

Doepaw soon came to the realization that travelling herbs could and would dampen her mood at all times. She swiped her tongue over her muzzle for what seemed like the hundredth time - anything to get rid of the sour taste in her mouth. She felt like she was going to retch. All this gagging had to get her somewhere, right? Beside her, Willowpaw echoed her thoughts, nose crinkled in a disgusted manner, eyes bugging out of her skull. She ran a tail down her sister's side in what she hoped was a comforting way and not one that exposed the silent laughs that shook her frame.

"They get better eventually," Lilypaw said, returning from grabbing her own leaf wrap. "Wait, no, that's a lie. They don't." She coughed on the aftertaste, squinting angrily through the fit of hacking.

"It's worth it, though," Willowpaw wheezed, and the other gathered cats nodded eagerly. Sandpaw had joined them, and Rosepaw was making her way over, mimicking the taste with her expression.

"This is your first Peace Day, right?" Sandpaw asked. His tail lashed over the grass in anticipation.

"Yep," Doepaw responded breathlessly. "I'm so excited."

"We won't be able to compete in any of the good events," Lilypaw whined tactlessly. "It's the warriors that get the best ones!"

"Oh, hush," Rosepaw chided, sitting down beside her sister. "Just be grateful that we aren't still in the nursery, watching the other cats go on without us." She gestured subtly towards Brackenwing's litter with a toss of her head, and all eyes trained on the kits.

"Why can't we come?" That was Cougarkit, his tone pleading. Next to him, his brother, Thornkit, kneaded the ground with his claws, tearing up bits of grass and earth in his wake. Their sister, Hollykit, was stewing dangerously behind her brothers, eyes flaring with indignation.

"Shame." Willowpaw meowed, returning the group to their conversation.

"I remember *my* first Peace Day," Lilypaw chimed in wistfully, whiskers twitching. "I didn't do very well in the competitions then, but Bearstep wasn't that disappointed. Now I'm *really* aching to shred some ears!"

"It's claws sheathed," Rosepaw reminded her sister.

"Oh. Well, then I'll have some very bruised opponents!"

The apprentices laughed at that, each imagining their own victories in vivid, yet very unrealistic daydreams. While Doepaw wasn't that confident that she would do well, she had hope. That would be enough to help her through the easiest stuff, but skill was needed later on. Skill that she wasn't too sure that she possessed.

It wasn't long before Waspclaw was going around and rallying the troops, chest puffed out at his importance. When he sauntered up to the apprentices, Doepaw could hardly see the resemblance between him and his more reserved brother.

"Come on!" He called out in his usual, overexcited fashion.

Doepaw was standing on adrenaline alone at this point. Her paws were shaking with nervous excitement, and her eyes twinkled. Beside her, Willowpaw wasn't much different, and she couldn't tell if she was about to be sick from the anticipation of the travel or a last stand from the traveling herbs. Either way, the look the two shared was meaningful: they had made it this far, no problem. Next, they'd be fighting badgers in their sleep.

More sure of herself now, Doepaw broke into a trot to catch up with the rest of the herd, tail swinging behind with her loping gait.

As they pressed through the grasses, Doepaw found herself walking alongside Lilypaw. The older cat, while not being much taller than a full-grown warrior, still towered over Doepaw, with her chin reaching the top of the younger cat's head. Her pale fur gleamed in the early dawn light, and it looked stunning, dappled by the

shadows of grasses and foliage.

"I think I'm most excited for the trees," Doepaw said suddenly, surprising herself with the revelation.

"All the novelties of Peace Day and you focus on the trees." Lilypaw snorted, shaking her head in disbelief.

"I can't imagine not being able to see the sky! What would that even..." Doepaw made a little noise, hoping that would explain the rest. Lilypaw rolled her eyes.

"Don't tell me *you* aren't fazed by that many trees!" Doepaw pressed, very *very* aware of how kit-like she was acting.

"My first Peace Day was in fox territory," Lilypaw explained simply. "Trees were the least of my worries."

Doepaw quieted. Her adventure seemed infinitely smaller than her companion's. They let the conversation fall into a comfortable (or maybe it was uncomfortable?) silence as they wove through grasses and darted around patches of mud. This part of the territory was overgrown and not yet worn down by countless footfalls. It was hard to imagine how much space that CloudClan actually owned - Doepaw's adventures could only take her so far before she had to retreat back to camp.

Ahead of her, a group of younger warriors reminisced about past moons of competition. Waspclaw boasted amiably about his victory over a fox, only to be interrupted by Pebblefoot's reminder of his opponents age. Other groups seemed to be faring likewise. Every cat was eager to flex their claws and stretch their muscles to prove their strength. Bearstep himself had earned his right to being deputy by winning a series of competitions on Peace Day.

But the early morning excitement faded to exhaustion as dawn bled into mid-day. The sun was hot and forceful from it's perch in the sky, and only a single cloud crept slowly towards the celestial body. Agitation burned in the younger cats; even Bearstep seemed to be loosing his calm demeanor.

"When are we going to get there?" Doepaw whined to no one in particular.

Willowpaw hissed in agreement. Traveling herbs and a quick breakfast wouldn't make them across the world, and hunger would soon be knawing at everyone's stomachs.

No one seemed to have an answer for them.

"Why don't we play a game?" Rosepaw asked from behind them, nursing a cracked paw pad.

"Yeah, I'm sure moss ball would go fantastically," Willowpaw snapped sarcastically.

"Not *moss ball,*" Rosepaw meowed with a roll of her eyes. "Lilypaw and I played this on the last trip."

From farther back, Lilypaw nodded enthusiastically.

"It's simple, really. All you have to do is find something, say one quality it has, and the others guess!" Rosepaw looked pleased with herself.

Sandpaw purred in amusement. "So this is supposed to get us through to MoonClan?"

Rosepaw nodded insistently.

"Alright, er, I see something white," Willowpaw started.

"That cloud over there?"

"Nope."

"Your fur?"

"No."

Willowpaw had to eventually tell everyone that she had picked Frostwhisker's whiskers (with a not so subtle glance at Doepaw).

"I see something blue," Sandpaw meowed quickly, interrupting the

heated argument spurring between Willowpaw and Rosepaw over if whiskers counted in the game.

"The sky," Lilypaw suggested.

Sandpaw muttered out a quick "Foxdung," before nodding.

"I see... I see *trees!"* Lilypaw shouted eagerly.

Rosepaw was not given the chance to remind her that that was not how the game worked.

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Author's Note

It sucks, but it'll be edited when I finish the book.

Yet Another A/N

Geez, it's been a week and already you people have pushed me past a milestone. I'm not complaining, keep going, but I am apologizing. I've lost motivation for wattpad in general? I will continue Cascade, but infrequently at best. School is taking up a large bulk of my time, and I have extra curricular activities that I didn't expect would interrupt what I have going for me here. Add that to my procrastination skills and... Well, I'm a walking zombie.

This isn't goodbye. This is just an 'until next time' of sorts. I do have an instagram account, if you wanted to be updated with my daily, roleplaying life. (the.underlyingmeaning)

Thank you so much for what you've given me.

- Cresci